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FRESNO, Calif. -- From outer space, no feature of North America sticks out quite like California's Central Valley, a long flat gouge between mountain ranges that is the world's richest farm region.

An irrigated marvel blessed with Mediterranean climate, the 400-mile-long valley grows 250 crops, from almonds to zucchini, worth \$16 billion a year, roughly one-tenth of America's farm output off less than 1% of its cropland.

But the valley is under siege, its fertile acres more threatened by urban sprawl than anywhere else in the country. From Sacramento to Bakersfield, developers are paving over rich alluvial soil with subdivisions and shopping centers.

An organic vegetable farm is plowed under for schools outside Clovis. A 1,400-acre subdivision takes over cotton fields and almond orchards north of Bakersfield, miles from any other development. A plum orchard is ripped out to make way for a Presbyterian church between Visalia and Tulare. A children's hospital in Fresno grabs donated land amid citrus groves and olive orchards.

If the valley's population more than doubles, as projected, by 2040 -- fueled by commuters fleeing punishing home prices along the coast -- more than 1 million cultivated acres will be lost and 2.5 million more put at risk, the American Farmland Trust estimates.

Alarm is spreading, but efforts to confine sprawl and save cropland have been haphazard. Here in Fresno, the nation's top agricultural county, an unusual alliance of traditional foes is trying to change deeply ingrained land-use patterns. But over much of the valley, political will to resist sprawl is weak when developers are paying \$30,000 an acre.

"In the straight economics of it, agriculture can't compete with development. It just doesn't have the revenue generation," says Daniel Sumner, an agricultural economist at the University of California at Davis.

Says Denny Jackman, chairman of a Modesto group pressing for ballot measures to limit sprawl: "The piecemeal elimination of farmland is just as prevalent in the valley as it was in Los Angeles 50 years ago."

But despite the losses, there's no consensus -- in the valley or elsewhere -- that public policy ought to favor farmland preservation at the expense of other industries. Critics point out that the USA has 400 million acres of cropland, the same amount it had 80 years ago. By most estimates, the Central Valley is losing just 1% of its productive land per decade.

Too much food?

From Oregon's Willamette Valley to Florida's southern tip, sprawl encroaches on many other signature farming regions, but not even die-hard preservationists suggest America's food supply is at risk. U.S. agriculture arguably produces too much food: Last year, the federal government paid farmers \$22 billion to prop up commodity prices or leave land idle.

And the trend is for higher yields on less land. A study by Alvin Sokolow at the University of California Cooperative Extension found that even though the Central Valley's total cropland shrank by 500,000 acres from 1978 to 1992, the value of its commodities rose by \$4.7 billion.

Until recently, Sokolow says, local governments saw farmland as "a bank to draw cheap land out of."

In the preservation debate, the Central Valley is unique: Nowhere else is so much humanity pinching so large and valuable a resource. (With few exceptions -- Chicago's outer fringes and southern Michigan -- sprawl only marginally affects farmland in the vast Midwest grain belt.)

Consumers nationwide rely on the valley's bounty. All the raisins and almonds grown in the USA come from the Central Valley, as do 90% of the processed tomatoes, 85% of the table grapes and 80% of the navel oranges. "Because of its very high-quality cropland, over the very long term, 200 or 300 years out, we may regret the losses there," says Ralph Heimlich, an economist with the U.S. Agriculture Department.

Leapfrog development

Preservationists take a shorter-term view. Running through the heart of the valley along Highway 99 are dozens of cities and towns that grew up a century ago to support agriculture. They're all surrounded by farmland, and when they annex land to grow, they gobble up productive acres.

Worse, preservationists say, is that counties permit developers to take land out of production in unincorporated areas away from the cities, often for "ranchettes" on oversized lots craved by city folks seeking open space and a rural lifestyle. That results in even more development in a leapfrog cycle.

Elected officials in some areas -- Kern County, San Joaquin County, the city of Tracy, to name just three -- embrace growth and readily allow building on prime land. Municipalities in Fresno, Tulare, Stanislaus and Yolo counties try to keep growth inside the cities or direct it to the least-fertile acreage outside.

But few cities have traded a habit of big-yard, two-car-garage sprawl for compact, higher-density building schemes or invested in revitalizing blighted neighborhoods. Mass transit, high-rise living and residential zones that combine housing, stores and offices are rare.

"Across the country we see a return to urban living. We think the market is there if housing is affordable and attractive," says Greg Kirkpatrick, Central Valley coordinator for the American Farmland Trust, an organization based in Washington, D.C., that helps local groups buy development rights on prime acreage.

Farm work and cheap housing have been drawing a steady stream of newcomers to the Central Valley since the 1930s. First came the "Okies" and other itinerant Midwesterners fleeing the Dust Bowl. From the 1950s on, it has been Mexican and Latin American immigrants. In the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians arrived here after the

Communists triumphed in Indochina.

For the last 20 years, migration also has occurred within California as coastal residents moved inland seeking moderate home prices and less congestion. The valley added 1.8 million residents from 1980 to 1995, a 50% gain, while the rest of California grew by 37%. By last year, the valley's population stood at 4.7 million.

Many of the jobs, however, are still back on the coast. The two-hour commute -- from Bakersfield over the Tehachapi Mountains to Los Angeles or from Modesto and Stockton through Altamont Pass into San Jose and the Silicon Valley -- is becoming a way of life.

"You can't believe how many cars are leaving Bakersfield at 5 in the morning headed south," says Jack Pandol, a farmer in Kern County who chaired a task force that studied the effect of rapid growth on Central Valley agriculture. "It's getting worse all the time."

Critics say preservationists exaggerate the problem. The American Farmland Trust estimates that by 2040 about 1 million acres, equal to an area 40 miles by 62 miles, will be lost from the 6.7 million acres now under cultivation in the valley's 11 core counties. That's about 25,000 acres a year. But in state surveys since 1984, losses were less than half that, and political pressure for more efficient land use is far greater today.

Even developer-friendly Kern County has seen "a very tangible shift in the political winds," Pandol says. "The county supervisors are beginning to understand that carte blanche growth is not fiscally responsible."

Growth means jobs

The building industry says preservationists take a myopic view of the valley's economy, where joblessness can be triple the statewide average. Winter unemployment hit 20% in Tulare County last year and 16% in Fresno County.

The valley has not shared California's high-tech boom and needs to diversify its job base, these critics say. Forsaking farmland to achieve that is considered a worthy tradeoff.

Builders believe urban-growth boundaries or "green lines" drawn around cities to protect farmland will only drive up housing costs and price moderate-income buyers out of the market.

In Stanislaus County, ballot initiatives this year and next in nine cities and countywide would require voter approval for any new subdivision on land not already targeted for urban use.

"Short-term, this would be great," says Ed Taczanowsky, vice president of the Building Industry Association of Central California. "We'd make a lot of money." Builders would charge a lot more for houses.

"We'd be the Bay Area all over again," he says. "Long-term it would be devastating, a turn-off to new job-creation."

But many preservationists say growth projections are low and local governments don't fully grasp the exponential effect that a doubling or tripling of the population would have on farmland. If jobs from Silicon Valley and the Los Angeles basin follow commuters into the valley, that would set up another growth cycle.

"We're not suggesting new jobs aren't a good idea," says Ralph Grossi, president of the American Farmland Trust. "But communities have

to manage the growth. In our definition, that means keep it off the best farmland."

Fresno has tried to do that since 1983, when three jurisdictions -- the county, the city of Fresno and nearby Clovis -- jointly laid out urban boundaries. Growth now laps at those boundaries, but in January Fresno's City Council tentatively approved keeping them where they are.

For one of the nation's fastest-growing big cities, that would mean higher densities in new developments, essentially doubling overall the number of housing units per acre. It would mean selling car-dependent residents used to 6,000-square-foot lots on the virtues of high rises, mass transit and postage-stamp yards. It would mean restoring neighborhood intimacy to a strip-mall landscape. It would mean orienting people back to the city's core by remaking a dying downtown.

None of that would be easy, and nothing prevents the jurisdictions from changing the boundaries later on. But an unusual alliance of home builders, farmland protectors, business interests and the Farm Bureau has agreed that any future expansion of the city's borders would be on the least productive acres.

Neighborhood groups worry that mixed uses -- high rises, condos, apartments and single-family homes on smaller lots -- will erode their property values. They're leery of scattering those developments and ending up with awkward business clusters that compete with downtown.

"It will be Los Angelization," says Joni Johnson, a director of the Fresno Neighborhood Alliance. "It doesn't protect the existing neighborhoods or the existing downtown."

The wine-country model

In the valley, a lot of people think Fresno is already going the way of Los Angeles, and the city's efforts to protect farmland as it grows will be watched closely.

California's wine country provides one model. Marin, Sonoma and Napa counties, north of San Francisco, had open-space and farmland battles in the 1970s and preserved their rural character with a combination of protective zoning, tax breaks to farmers and private trust money to buy development rights.

Similar measures are taking hold in the Central Valley, but the stakes are higher, the farmland more crucial and the economics more lopsided today.

Although it's not true that if you scratch a farmer you always find a developer, property rights remain a sore issue. Even farmers who want to protect their land resent a zoning change that costs a neighbor a potential \$30 million -- the difference in value of 1,000 prime acres farmed vs. developed.

Public and private efforts to pay farmers for development rights and keep prime land in agriculture are intensifying in the valley. But population is increasing even faster. Fifty years ago, before Fresno was the nation's No. 1 farm county, the title belonged to Los Angeles.

"Doomsayers give the impression the valley will be paved over by next February," the University of California's Sumner says. "It won't. But plenty of us say 50 years is not that long either."

Nation's farmland under siege

The 10 U.S. farm regions threatened by development:

1. Central Valley (California)
2. Northern Piedmont (parts of Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia)
3. Southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois Drift Plain
4. Texas Blackland Prairie (eastern part of the state)
5. Willamette and Puget Sound valleys (parts of Oregon and Washington)
6. Southern tip of Florida, including the Everglades
7. Eastern Ohio Till Plain
8. Lower Rio Grande Plain (southern Texas)
9. Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain (parts of Delaware and Maryland)
10. New England and eastern New York Upland (parts of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island)

Source: American Farmland Trust

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John Ritter, *Valley of plenty fights to survive.*, USA Today, 03-01-2000, pp 01A.

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